The Spread of Fake Online Information and It's Impact on Society

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, online platforms serve as a powerful means for the rapid dissemination of information, yet they also fuel the pervasive spread of misinformation. This research explores the origins, dissemination mechanisms, and profound societal impact of fake news. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from communication, psychology, and technology, the study assesses the influence of misinformation on public opinion, political discourse, and individual behavior. Investigating technological advancements and social media platforms, the paper examines users' role in amplifying misinformation, revealing how false information leads to real-world consequences such as panic, political instability, and trust erosion. Addressing the challenges of combating fake news, the research considers ethical concerns of censorship and emphasizes the role of media literacy in empowering individuals to critically evaluate information. In conclusion, this paper contributes to the discourse on fake news by offering a holistic understanding and valuable recommendations to tackle the societal challenges posed by the unchecked proliferation of false information in the digital-age.

Keywords: False News, Misinformation, Online Media, Web, Social Impact, Censorship.

INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of the digital age, the ubiquitous presence of online platforms has fundamentally transformed the way information is disseminated, consumed, and interpreted (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016; Kim & Lyon, 2014). One of the paramount challenges accompanying this paradigm shift is the insidious proliferation of fake news and misinformation, a phenomenon that has gained unprecedented prominence and influence (Kumar et al., 2018; Olan et al., 2022). Fake news, characterized by deliberately misleading content, has emerged as a formidable force, capable of shaping public opinion, influencing political discourse, and fostering societal unrest (Goyanes et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2023). The pervasiveness of fake news raises pressing questions about the veracity of information in the digital age and its implications for the well-being of individuals and the stability of societies. The surge of fake news in India has roots in the increasing accessibility of digital platforms and the rapid spread of information through social media. The impact of fake news on Indian society is multifaceted (Al-Zaman, 2021b). Firstly, it has the potential to influence public opinion on critical issues, affecting political discourse, social harmony, and community relations. False narratives can be manipulated to sway public sentiments, leading to polarization and the amplification of divisive ideologies (Kanozia et al., 2021). Secondly, the credibility of mainstream media is at risk as misinformation proliferates. With the ease of creating and sharing content, distinguishing between genuine news and fake news becomes challenging for the average consumer. This erosion of trust in traditional media sources can have profound consequences on the democratic fabric of the nation (A. M. Guess et al., 2020). Thirdly, the rise of fake news has led to real-world consequences, such as instances of mob violence and communal tensions fueled by misleading information.

Rumors spread through social media platforms have triggered incidents of violence, highlighting the potential dangers of unchecked misinformation. The academic study of fake news and misinformation is vital for creating a more informed, resilient, and discerning society (McDougall, 2019). As we delve into this multifaceted exploration, it is imperative to navigate through the nuances of terminology, distinguishing between fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and manipulative information(Lim, 2023).

This study investigates the information ecosystem, dissemination mechanisms, impact on society, media literacy and awareness and regulatory frameworks. Through this exploration, we strive to illuminate the path toward a more resilient and discerning society in the face of the formidable challenges posed by the unchecked propagation of misinformation online.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As of January 2020, approximately 86% of the Indian population, totaling 1.38 billion individuals, were reported to have subscribed to mobile phone services, as disclosed by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. Most users, constituting an overwhelming percentage, opt for mobile services provided by private entities, with around 10% choosing public service providers. A significant portion of the populace, amounting to 687 million individuals, accesses the Internet and news content through mobile devices ("India: Primary News Sources 2023 Statista," 2024). In 2017, the earliest year for which data is available, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 257 cases of fake news/rumors in India. By 2020, this figure surged to 1,527 cases, marking an almost 500% increase. In 2021, the reported data indicated a decrease to 882 cases, still more than three times the 2017 count. A 2018 survey by Reuters Institute and the University of Oxford revealed that concerns about fake news span across age groups. Research indicates that fake news, often due to its sensationalized content, spreads faster and wider than factual reports. A significant majority of Indians accessing online news expressed worry about the authenticity of the news they encounter. A thorough analysis of 34 fake news studies, consolidating their findings into six distinct types: news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, and advertising. These categories are delineated based on the levels of facticity and the underlying intentions of the misinformation. This typology, rooted in the communication domain, provides a nuanced understanding of the various ways in which misinformation can manifest (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018).

A 2021 study featured in the Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research (AJPOR) investigated 419 instances of social media fake news and discovered that online media, rather than traditional print and broadcast sources, was the primary source of misinformation. The study revealed that health, religion, and politics were the most common subjects of fake news (Al-Zaman, 2021b). Another study in AJPOR in 2021 identified Facebook and Twitter as the main platforms for spreading fake news, with 81% of the 90 analyzed cases shared on Facebook and 49% on Twitter. The majority of these reports were in video format (50%), and approximately one-third consisted of images with accompanying text.

The Covid-19 pandemic notably accelerated the spread of fake news (Al-Zaman, 2021). Globally, traditional media consumption, including TV and print, decreased from 63% in 2017 to 51% in 2022, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022. Selective avoidance of news, driven by its perceived negative impact on mood, has doubled in Brazil (54%) and the UK (46%) over the last five years (Newman et al., 2021; Yanatma, 2018).

Conceptual Framework:
The study examines the information ecosystem, dissemination mechanisms, impact on society, media literacy and awareness and regulatory frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

Retrospective Comparative Analysis
Given the longitudinal nature of the research topic, a retrospective comparative analysis was employed. This approach involves examining existing data and trends over a specified period to identify patterns and changes related to the spread of false information.

Data Collection
Data collected from online and established databases such as Google Scholar, and Research Gate. The existing research and survey reports collected from the reputable research institutes, government institution, agencies, and non-government organizations.

Data Analysis
Examination of temporal trends in the prevalence and characteristics of false information. Correlation and comparative analysis were performed to understand specific events, societal developments, and proliferation of false information.

## RESULTS

The Sources and Platforms
India is swiftly becoming a mobile-centric media market, with 68% favoring smartphones for online news, surpassing desktops (17%) and tablets (3%) (Aneez et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2021). Additionally, 31% exclusively rely on mobile devices (Figure 1). In a 2023 survey (1,013 respondents), 72% accessed news online, with social media (52%), television (49%), and print media (40%) as primary sources (Figure 2). YouTube and WhatsApp dominate social media usage at 56% and 47%, while Telegram and Twitter lag in 2023 (Newman et al., 2021). 18% directly visit news websites, 32% prefer access through websites or applications. Only 18% use search engines, with 24% relying on social media. Alternative methods include notifications, aggregator messaging, or email (Figure 3). Social networks significantly influence Indian news consumption, with around 376.1 million active users. Facebook and YouTube lead at

43% and 42%, followed by WhatsApp (24%) and Instagram (18%). Twitter and Telegram trail at 14% and 9% (Figure 4). These findings highlight the growing reliance on social media as the primary channel for news access in India.
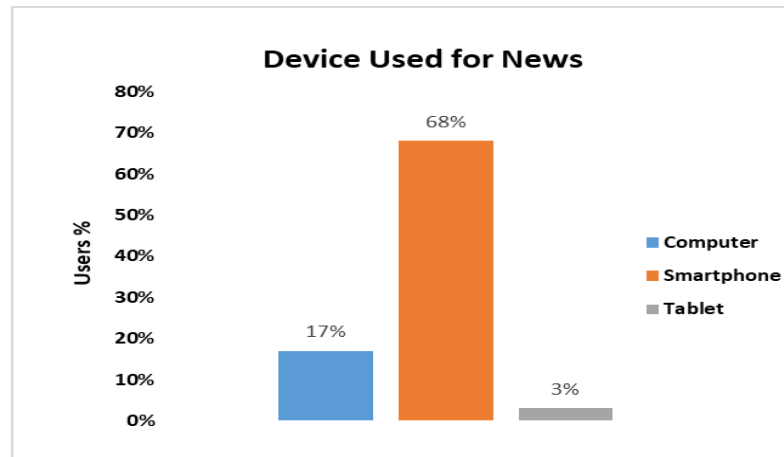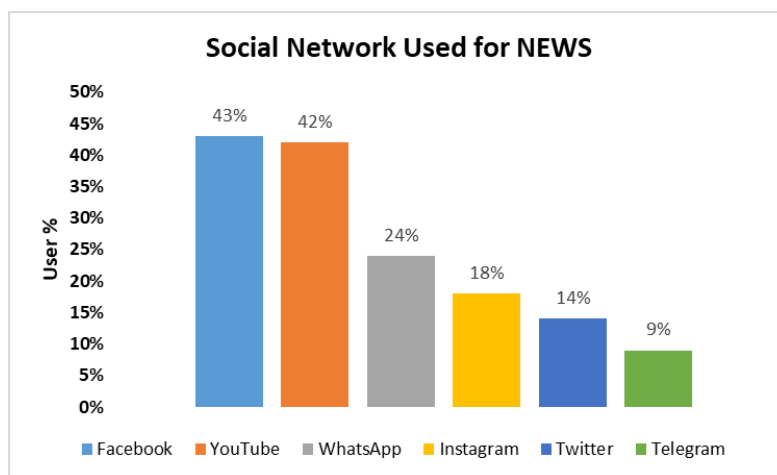

Figure 1- Main devices used for NEWS (Aneez et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2021)
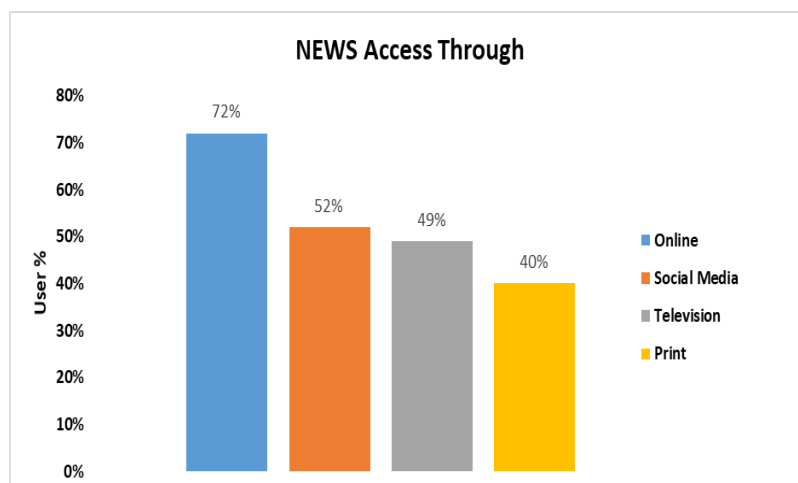
Figure 2-Share of sources used to access news across India in 2023 ("India: Primary News Sources 2023 Statista," 2024).
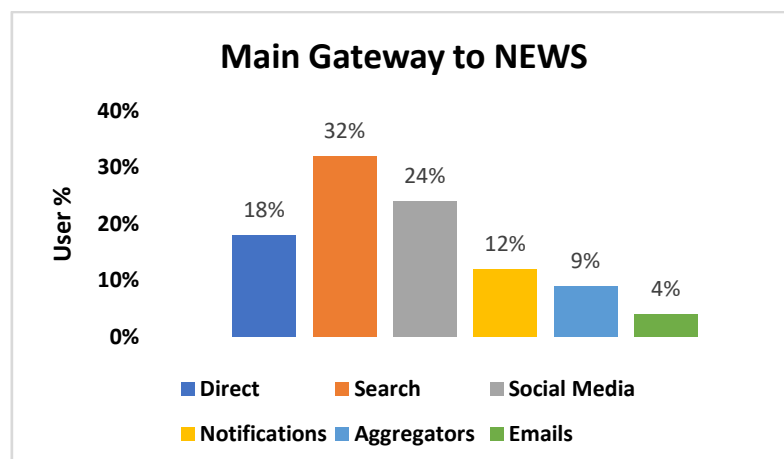
Figure 3- Share of main gateway derive individual to NEWS in India (Aneez et al., 2019)

Figure 4- Proportion that used each social network for news (Aneez et al., 2019)

Prevalences of Fake News

Fake news encompasses various formats, including fabricated texts, photos, videos, and audio files (Sukhodolov & Bychkova, 2017) The findings reveal six prominent themes dominating fake news on social media: health, religion, politics, crime, entertainment, and miscellaneous, as outlined in Table 1 (Al-Zaman, 2021b). Notably, 54% of Indians source their information from social media, as indicated by the (Oxford University Press - Find, 2022). It is noticed that the rise has been seen as much as 214% of fake news and rumors (Open Government Data (OGD) Platform India, 2020). Alt News has been actively engaged in the debunking of spurious news articles within the Indian context since its inception in April 2016. As of April 2020, the platform has successfully refuted approximately 2,028 instances of fabricated news, thereby contributing significantly to the dissemination of accurate and credible information in the public domain. The four virtual entertainment platforms prone to disseminating fake news are Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, all of which hold significant popularity in India ("Methodology for Fact Checking - Alt News," 2018). Analyzing data on misinformation and false intelligence pertaining to Indian states, the state of Telangana reported the highest number of fake news events, totaling 81 cases. Following closely, Tamil Nadu reported 37 incidents, while Uttar Pradesh documented 36. Maharashtra recorded 23 instances, and both Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh reported 15 cases each. West Bengal documented 10 occurrences of fake news, Rajasthan had 5, and Assam reported 3. Bihar, Gujarat, Meghalaya, and Manipur each reported 2, 1, 1, and 1 case, respectively (Figure 5).

Table 1- The six dominant areas of fake news spread and their respected percentage of events (Al-Zaman, 2021a, 2021b)

| S. No.	Themes	Percentage
1	Health	27.2
2	Religion	25.1
3	Politics	24.3
4	Crime	10.7
5	Miscellaneous	7.6
6	Entertainment	5
	Total	**100**
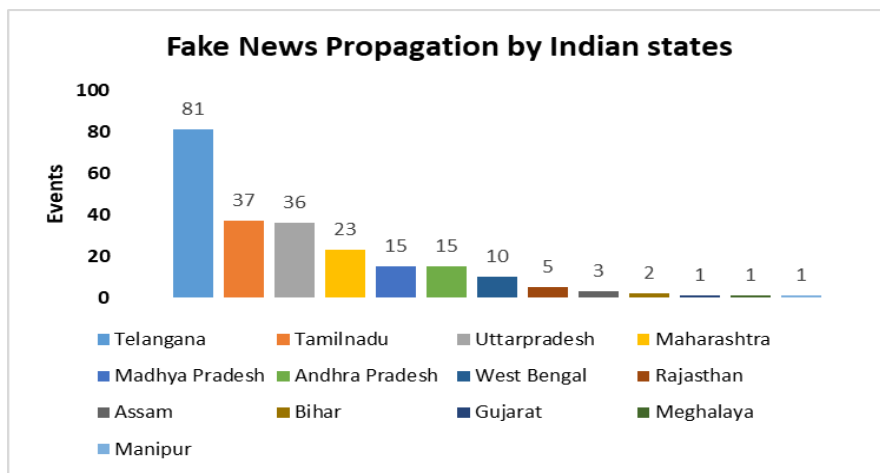
Figure 5- Number of fake news propagation offences reported across India in 2022, by leading state

Dissemination Patterns
The pathways of fake news on social networks are complex, influenced by influential users and network structure & the algorithms, such as recommendation features, unintentionally amplify fake news. User behavior, including sharing and engagement, contributes to fake news virality. Del Vicario et al., (2016) study found users sharing false information more than accurate information, fueling widespread dissemination. Understanding these dynamics is essential for devising effective strategies against the proliferation of false information. The data shown in figure 6 depicted the main reason and tactics for new dissemination ("India: Primary News Sources 2023 Statista," 2024). In this data the political or commercial will of spreading the misinformation was found higher than any other reasons.
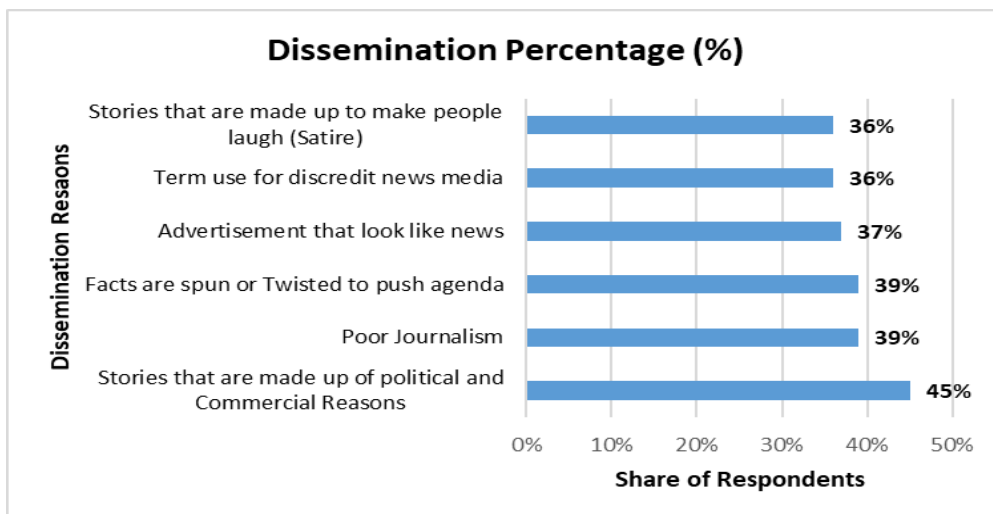
Figure 6- Fake News dissemination patter and share of respondents about dissemination ("India: Primary News Sources 2023 Statista," 2024).

Impact on Society
Research studies have investigated these consequences to better understand the societal implications of false information. False information erodes trust in traditional media and online sources. Edelman's Trust Barometer reports highlight a decline in trust in media institutions globally, with misinformation contributing to skepticism (Edelman, 2021). Fake news fuels political polarization and has been a key player in election interference across 18 countries, including the US. Governments in 30 nations, such as Venezuela, the Philippines, and Turkey, utilize "opinion shapers" to manipulate social media for their agendas. State and non-state actors are increasingly employing automated accounts to sway online discussions. A study links exposure to misinformation on social media to polarized political beliefs (A. Guess et al., 2019; A. M. Guess et al., 2020). The tangible real-world consequences of false information further emphasize the need for addressing the spread of misinformation in the digital age. The pervasive spread of misinformation in the media poses a severe social challenge, fostering a toxic online atmosphere and inciting real-world consequences such as riots and lynching's (Table 2).

Table 2- Showing the misinformation leading to death, injuries, and arrests in Indian states

Date	State	Deaths	Injuries	Arrests
May 17, 2018	Jharkhand	4		
May 17, 2017	Jharkhand	1		
May 17, 2017	Jharkhand	2		
May 12, 2017	Jharkhand	2		
April 18, 2020	Maharashtra	3		110
April 10, 2018	Tamil Nadu	1	3	42
May 11, 2018	Tamil Nadu	1		20
July 1, 2018	Maharashtra	5		
June 8, 2018	Maharashtra	2	7	400
July 1, 2018	Maharashtra	0	4	
July 19, 2018	Madhya Pradesh	1		14
April 29, 2018	Tamil Nadu	1		

According to the survey conducted by Reuter, a substantial 43% of respondents expressed concern about the excessive coverage of COVID-19 and politics in news outlets. Additionally, 36% of participants reported a negative impact of news consumption on their well-being, while 29% indicated a sense of fatigue attributable to the volume of news coverage. Another 29% of respondents identified concerns related to the trustworthiness and potential bias of news sources. A notable 17% of participants highlighted instances where news consumption led to interpersonal conflicts, prompting a preference for avoidance. Finally, 16% of survey participants articulated a perceived lack of agency in managing the type of news content they encounter (Figure 7).
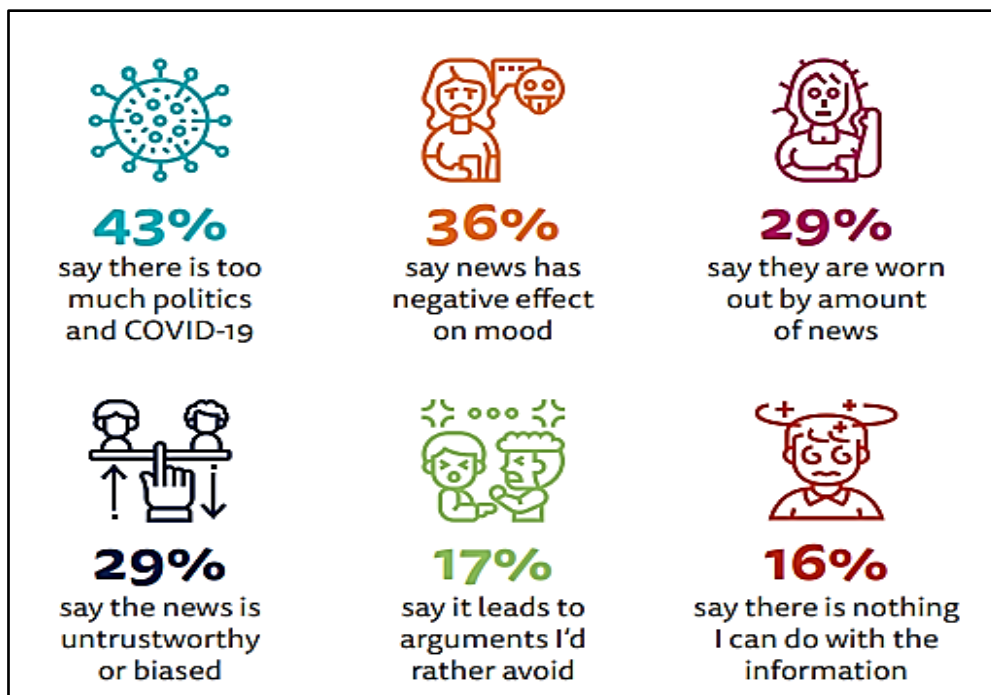
Figure 7- Most common reasons for news avoidance all markets
**(Reuters, 2023; Newman et al., 2021)**

User Engagement
It is estimated that 41% of the people of India trusts most of the news published, surfaced, or spread in any platform. The user engagement with fake news, such as the number of views, shares, and comments on misleading content could be about health, politics, celebrities, climate change, immigration, and products (scams). Recent data of Reuters report (2022) discussed portion of the fake news in these sections are given in figure 8. The high proportion of individuals, at 45%, encountering false or misleading information about COVID-19 is concerning. The substantial proportion, at 42%,

reporting exposure to false or misleading political information highlights the vulnerability of political discourse to misinformation. The prevalence of false or misleading information about celebrities, reported by 29% of respondents, indicates that misinformation is not confined to serious or political topics. While the proportion is comparatively lower at 15%, the presence of false or

misleading information about climate change is noteworthy. The relatively lower proportion, at 9%, reporting exposure to false or misleading information about immigration suggests that misinformation on this topic is less prevalent among the surveyed individuals.
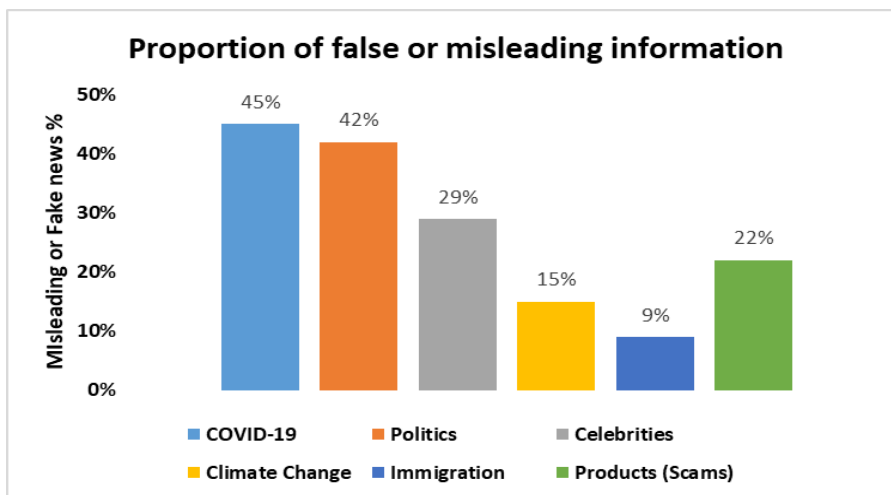
Figure 8-Percentage of people who encountered inaccurate or deceptive news on each subject

Detection and Mitigation

Over the past five years, the @PIBFactCheck social media handles have played a crucial role in combating the proliferation of misinformation. In 2019, 17 instances of fake news were exposed, providing a foundation for fact-checking efforts. The following year, there was a significant surge, with 394 cases busted, marking a staggering increase in the battle against misinformation. However, the team's diligence and efforts bore fruit in 2021, resulting in a notable decrease of 27.91%, exposing

285 false claims. In 2022, there was a subsequent rise, revealing 338 instances, reflecting an 18.6% increase in debunking fake news. The momentum in countering misinformation continued into 2023, with a substantial drop of 62.72%, bringing the total number of cases busted to 126. In the cumulative analysis, the @PIBFactCheck handles have witnessed a commendable 6723.53% increase in the overall fight against fake news (Table 3).

Table 3- Number of Fake News busted on @PIBFact Check Social Media Handles

Year	Number of Fake News busted on @PIBFact Check Social Media Handles	Percent (%) Change in Fake News	Increased or decreased
2019	17	NA	NA
2020	394	2217.65%	Increased
2021	285	-27.91%	Decreased
2022	338	18.6%	Increased
2023	**126**	**-62.72%**	**Decreased**
Total	**1160**	6723.53%	Increased

In the relentless pursuit of curbing the dissemination of fake news and misinformation, significant measures were taken in blocking channels and websites over the past few years. The years 2018 to 2020 saw a commendable trend of zero online news channels and websites being blocked. However, in 2021, a strategic response was initiated with the blocking of 20 online news channels and 2 websites.

This escalated further in 2022, demonstrating a robust approach as 84 online news channels and 23 websites were actively blocked, reflecting an intensified commitment to combating the spread of misinformation and maintaining the integrity of information channels (Figure 9). Figure 10 illustrates a systematic process for detecting and addressing false information.
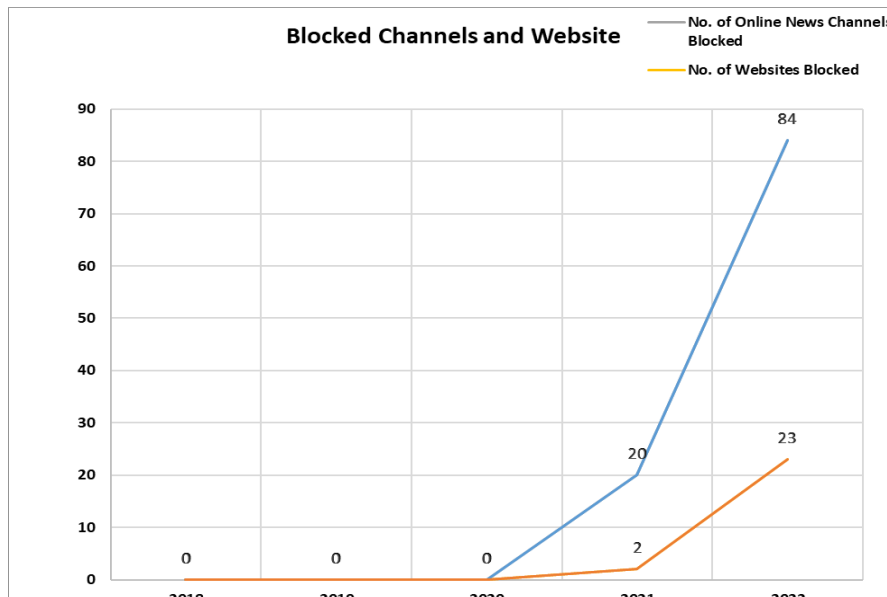
Figure 9-Number of Blocked channels and Websites due to fake news and misinformation

Figure 10- Identification and mitigation of the fake news (Source IFLA)

DISCUSSION

In the global prevalence of fake news are undeniable, affecting nations from the United States to emerging economies like India and Brazil. The pervasive nature of fake news is particularly concerning in India, which stands as the world's largest democracy with the second-largest population (Population Clock: World, 2024).

The study underscores social media platforms, notably Facebook and YouTube, as significant sources of fake news dissemination due to their accessible content-sharing mechanisms. Extensive data analysis reveals a concerning prevalence of misinformation across diverse domains, emphasizing its pervasive impact. Political and health-related misinformation, with higher prevalence rates, emerges as a considerable challenge for public discourse and decision-making.

Key factors contributing to India's fake news issue include heightened social media penetration, a rise in internet-illiterate users, and existing laws complicating the tracing of fake news producers. However, the absence of specific data on the frequency of fake news on each source limits a comprehensive understanding of misinformation dynamics.

Research indicates that the spread of false information is a complex process influenced by various factors, including social networks, algorithms, and user behavior. Social media plays a pivotal role in amplifying fake news, with algorithms inadvertently promoting false information through recommendation algorithms and trending topics features. User behavior, such as sharing and engaging with content, contributes to the vitality of misinformation, as demonstrated by Del Vicario et al. (2016). The consequences of misinformation extend beyond the digital realm, contributing to a toxic online atmosphere and inciting real-world incidents like riots and lynching's. Instances of online rumors leading to the tragic deaths of innocent people are documented, emphasizing the tangible impact of fake news. Understanding the speed and pathways of fake news dissemination through social networks requires a multi-faceted approach, considering algorithmic mechanisms, user behavior, network structures, and cognitive biases. Recent survey data reported by Reuters underlines the pervasive impact of misinformation in today's media landscape (Figure 8). These findings highlight the complex challenges posed by misinformation, emphasizing the need for comprehensive interventions to address its spread and the far-reaching implications on individual well-being and societal cohesion. Strategies promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible news reporting are crucial for navigating the intricate landscape of contemporary information dissemination.

Approximately 41% of the Indian population is estimated to trust most of the news across various platforms. Understanding user behavior is crucial for designing interventions that target the root causes of engagement with false information, promoting a more discerning and critical online community.

Fact-checkers, dedicated organizations, and systematic verification play crucial roles (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Media literacy programs impart skills like source verification and critical analysis (Livingstone & Third, 2017). User-friendly reporting mechanisms allow individuals to flag suspected false content (Friggeri et al., 2014). Although there is no specific law against fake news in India, policy interventions can incentivize proactive measures. Regulatory bodies like the Press Council of India and the News Broadcasters Association work to hold platforms accountable. Public awareness campaigns educate individuals on the consequences of fake news (Lazer et al., 2018). Journalists are equipped with verification tools, and crowd sourced platforms aid fact-checking (Mocanu et al., 2013; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Collectively, these measures aim to address the multifaceted challenge of misinformation dissemination.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the predominant platforms for news consumption in India, with Facebook and YouTube emerging as the most favored, commanding 43% and 42% of user preferences, respectively. The data also reveals diverse methods of accessing news content, with a nominal proportion (18%) opting for direct visits to news portals, while a larger contingent (32%) prefers direct access through news websites or applications. The impact of fake news on society is evident, with instances leading to a poisonous atmosphere on the web, causing riots, lynchings, and even the tragic deaths of innocent people. Study highlights substantial proportion (42%) reporting exposure to false political information emphasizes the vulnerability of political discourse to misinformation. In the fight against misinformation, the @PIBFactCheck social media handles have played a crucial role.

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